

10-19-1975

# Italian Women and Girls: Interview with Carmen Conte by Carmela Santoro

Carmen Conte

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COVER SHEET FOR INTERVIEWS

NAME OF INTERVIEWEE Carmen Conte

INTERVIEWER \_\_\_\_\_

DATE OF INTERVIEW October 19, 1975

SUBJECTS COVERED

Trip to America

Schooling

Meaning of Italian heritage, American heritage

Problems in school, feelings about education

Work experience

Thoughts on being Italian

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~~Carmela~~  
Carmela Conte

October 19, 1975

Arrive U.S. 1956, 4½ years old

Q: Do you remember much about Italy?

A: I remember the big boat, my parents, how they looked.

I was really impressed with the people, it was more of a holiday. It wasn't a voyage that would mean the rest of my life.

Q: Did you think you were coming to a new country?

A: Now it was more of a vacation to me.

I can't say I remember N.Y. but I remember Connecticut.

My first impressions of where we lived are not very good.

I had never lived in a tenement. It was unusual. A lot of Portugese. Darker skinned people affected me. I had to go down every week for kerosene for the stove. I remember all the strange people and not understanding them. They spoke a different language. I remember watching T.V. and not knowing anything. In school (only kindergarten in Italy)--I remember the red and white uniforms and the nuns.

Q: Did you speak Italian at kindergarten?

A: Yes, not dialect.

Q: How did you learn English?

A: By a lot of hard times. Teachers didn't understand and punish me for things I didn't know. I went to St. Annes. <sup>in Providence</sup> and the nuns hitting my palms and I didn't know why. Then we moved from my aunts' and I remember (later public school) the teacher tried to tell us to be quiet and she put me in a closet.



I was about six years old. I still don't know why.

Q: Did you like school?

A: Yes. I was laughed at a lot. Slowly I got better. It was more the teachers than the students. It wasn't till 2nd grade that I had a fantastic nun who taught me. People thought I was stupid. As much as I am here I am still an Italian. I hate to hear criticism of Italians. When I returned to Italy ten years ago I felt it was my home.

Q: What does it mean to Italian?

A: By all its contributions to the world I am part of the art, the music, I am it.

Q: You are an American citizen?

A: Yes, through my parents.

Q: What is it to be an American?

A: The opportunity to get money, to afford certain things. Money, that is what it means to me. You can see it in the people. You can't be kind without being used, laughed at. The more you give the more they take. Living here... I may return to Italy, maybe living there for a summer I ; can come back with a better idea of how things are.

Q: Something happen to you here that makes you feel this way?

A: Yes, probably education. After the incident in kindergarten. I was punished for not knowing colors. Not knowing how to communicate was the problem. She was not a good enough teacher to help me progress. I was told that education was so important and I felt bad that I was doing so poorly and then we moved and then my parents saw the teachers about the situation. And then things were better. From then on I did well. I had an I.Q. test, maybe if I hadn't done well they wouldn't have put



much time into me.

Q: What happened when you went to Hopkins? Mount Pleasant?  
Did you still feel hostility or rejection?

A: There has always been hostility because I see my self different from others. Now it bothers me, but now not as much.

Q: Did the other kids make you feel an outsider?

A: Yes.

Q: Were the teachers as unfriendly?

A: After 2nd grade everything went well. I did well in school. There was uniforms and everyone was the same. When I went to public school and the dress was different it was not good. The teachers were okay. There were certain things I don't do and because of that I was different. If you're not part of the in thing you are out of it and because of the language it was even worse. You're old fashioned.

Q: Then you went to U.R.I.

A: I majored in secondary education, Italain, with a history-english minor. The only class I had trouble with was Italian. The teachers always thought I should be better because I was Italian. I didn't get the best Italian student because of that.

Q: So you became a teacher because there was something that you wanted to do for students that wasn't done for you.

A;; I find teachers have a hard exterior and they were not aware of how students are affected. Not being taken advantage of them but know how, the insight.

Q: How do feel on education?

A: I believe that education is very very important.

You have to look at the backgrounds of parents. If the parents



are from agricultural ways, then they feel a good farmer is important to be. But I feel that if you become anything, a teacher, a doctor that you are important in both countries.

Q: So you can't really generalize. Do you feel that America is like a new house?

A: Yes. In the beginning it is very unusual. I think every immigrant that comes to this country at first doesn't like it. The Statue of Liberty promises you Italy. When you reach N.Y., the epitamy of bad, poverty, if you remember the faces on those people, the hopelessness. They're hoping and then it's not very easy.

Q: Do you think those pictures are typical? How do you feel about the association with gangsters, the Mafia?

A: I don't like it, but every country has its underworld. I would want them to think them of the great things that Italy has given to the world. Think of Venice, Florence, a great writer, someone who has given to the world. That hurts.

Q: You are working as a secretary?

A: Yes, there are no jobs.

Q: Do you have any attitudes towards unions?

A: I haven't had any contact. Supposedly it is for the better.

Q: Would you join the teachers union?

A: I don't know. If I could get a job I wouldn't ask for so so much as they ask, the strikes are difficult. The teaching is more important than the unions.

Q: You see yourself as an Italian inside?

A: Yes.

Q: How did the Italians see you?



A: I think because of my accent and syntax I was identified as an American. They thought of me as an American but an Italian as an immigrant. They didn't see me as an American who was having a difficult time with the language even though words had changed.

Italians help those who try to speak the language. The Americans are very cold. They don't help.

Q: Are you interested in politics?

A: I am beginning to. The job market. I really don't know too much.

Q: Would you like to get involved?

A: Yes, I think I would. One way things get changed. Maybe helping others too.

Q: Would you still want to come to the U.S.?

A: That is difficult, because I found myself an educated person who is willing to teach. And now I am working, it is an insult. Perhaps when the job market opens. I might feel the same way in Italy. I would have to think more about that. Here we don't have any relatives, there we do. It hurts.